

A Tale of Two Cities

Background Information

Causes of the French Revolution:

The causes of the French Revolution were more complex than the oversimplified “cruelty of the aristocracy.” Poor economic policies, war, and the impossibility of social mobility all contributed to the overthrow of the royal family and the establishment of the First Republic.

- **Resentment toward absolute monarchy:**
Other nations (especially England) had already begun to limit the power of the monarchy and establish parliamentary bodies that, to varying degrees, represented the common people's interests and rights. A rising middle class (*bourgeoisie*) found itself gaining economic power, but was heavily taxed and denied political power.
- **Resentment toward *seigneurialism* by peasants, wage-earners, and the bourgeoisie:**
Just as other nations were beginning to change the structure of their governments, so, too, were they shedding the remnants of feudal economic and political control. In France, however, the rural countryside was still divided into manors or *seigneurs* in which serfs who lived on the land owed full allegiance and obedience to the lord of the manor who owned the land. As the economy shifted from a rural, agrarian economy to an urban commercial and pre-industrial economy, those whose incomes did not depend on the land resented the fact that they remained bound to the land as serfs.
- **The rise of Enlightenment ideals:**
Europe had already produced a generation of writers and philosophers who asserted the equality of humankind and the existence of certain basic rights belonging to all humans, regardless of birth, race, or class. In France, writers like Voltaire, Denis Diderot, de Montesquieu, de Condorcet, and Jean Jacques Rousseau challenged the economic, political, and social status quo.
- **Tremendous national debt, and a grossly inequitable system of taxation:**
France's involvement in the Seven Years' War (a multi-nation European war that included the last of the American French and Indian Wars) caused King Louis XVI to inherit tremendous debt from his grandfather (Louis XV). While early in his reign, Louis XVI was eager to reform France's economy and tax system, he met with very strong resistance from his advisors (members of the untaxed First and Second Estates—see below) and from his wife Marie Antoinette. Thus, France's mounting debt, a succession of years with poor crops, and the fact that only the poorest people in the nation could legally be taxed led to a desperate economy.

- **A failing economy, partly due to France's involvement and aid in the American Revolution:**
Because France had fought against England in the Seven Years' War and had been England's largest rival in the colonization of America, she supported the colonies in the Revolutionary War with both financial and military assistance. This served only to increase France's national debt, along with no reform of the tax structure.
- **Food scarcity in the months immediately before the Revolution:**
A harsh winter in 1787, heavy rains in the spring, and then a severe drought in the summer of 1788 led to a poor harvest. Of course, the first two estates claimed the "first fruits" of the harvest. Grain was in short supply—leading to a shortage of bread. When confronted with the hunger of the peasantry, government minister Joseph-François Foulon insisted that, since grass was good enough for his cattle, the peasants could also eat grass. This same famine was the occasion for Marie Antoinette's infamous quip, "let them eat cake."
- **Resentment at noble privilege and dominance in public life by the ambitious professional classes:**
There was a growing bourgeoisie that recognized its importance to France's economy and were often courted by impoverished aristocrats (think of how Darnay's inherited estate is described as debt-ridden), but who themselves enjoyed no political privilege, or even protection, from abuses of the Second Estate's noble privilege. Think of how Doctor Manette—a professional member of the bourgeoisie—was subject to imprisonment at the whim of the Evremonde brothers.
- **Influence of the American Revolution:**
In 1776, the English colonies in America had rebelled against their "parent country," had succeeded, and had founded a democratic republic based upon Enlightenment principles. France had assisted the colonies in their revolution; and now the bourgeoisie and intellectuals were poised to follow in the United States' footsteps and replace their government with one that would protect their inalienable rights.

There were two parties involved in the French Revolution. The Girondins were the moderate republicans and controlled the Legislative Assembly from late 1791 to late 1792. They were ultimately ousted by the radical Jacobins, led by the infamous Maximilien Robespierre. The Jacobins were the party responsible for the Reign of Terror. Clearly, the Defarges are members of this radical party, and it is a Jacobin newspaper that Carton reads when he visits the Defarges' wine shop the night before Darnay's scheduled execution.

Many historians consider this French Revolution to be a "failed" revolution because it resulted in the restoration to the throne of the same royal family that had been in power before the formation of the First Republic. Others see the French Revolution as the prototype of all later revolutions, especially the Russian Revolution in the early twentieth century.

The Three Estates:

A remnant of medieval feudalism, the three estates were:

- the clergy, “those who prayed,” or “those who ministered with the word of God;
- the aristocracy, originally knights, “those who ministered with the sword;” and
- everyone else. In the Middle Ages, this body would consist mostly of rural peasants, serfs, who were tied to the land and essentially owned by the landowner. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, the middle class, however, the first two estates’ treatment of the third estate became increasingly intolerable. In meetings of Estates General, each estate voted as a body. Thus, if the First and Second Estates banded together, they controlled two-thirds of the vote, even though they represented less than two-thirds of the populace. This is how the upper estates eventually exempted themselves from taxation, placing the full burden of national finance on the impoverished Third Estate.

Letters de Cachet:

Lettres de cachet may be defined as letters signed by the King of France, countersigned by one of his ministers, and closed with the royal seal (*cachet*).

The most famous *lettres de cachet* were punitive in nature, by which the King sentenced a subject to prison without trial and without an opportunity to hear the charges filed against him or the chance to defend himself.

Obviously, the *lettres de cachet* had many potential abuses. They could be used by the police to arrest and imprison “undesirables.” Heads of families could use them to lock away sons whose behavior was questionable, thus “protecting” the family “honor.” Wives could have husbands imprisoned, and husbands could have their wives put away. The fact is that the Secretary of State issued them at will, and in most cases, the king was completely unaware of their issue. In the 18th century, the letters were often issued without the name of the targeted person. The name was filled in when the poor subject was arrested.

The Citizeness Knitters:

The *citoyennes tricoteuses*, citizeness knitters, are famous in French Revolution lore. There are dozens of historical and psychological interpretations of their acts of unemotional knitting at the foot of the guillotine. Dickens clearly wants to portray them as heartless, like their leader, Madame Defarge.

Key Historic Events Highlighted in the Novel:

Book I, Chapter 1:

- In 1766, the Chevalier de la Barre was accused of acting disrespectfully to a religious procession. De la Barre had not removed his hat when he passed within 30 yards of a procession bearing a crucifix. He was condemned to have his tongue cut out, his right hand cut off, and afterwards to be burned alive. His sentence was later “softened” to decapitation prior to burning.

Book I, Chapter 4:

- In pre-Revolutionary France, the *lettres de cachet*, authorized a person’s arrest and imprisonment—without benefit of trial or appeal—at the pleasure of the monarch. These *lettres de cachet* were sometimes sold, with blanks to be filled in by the purchaser. Thus the monarch had no knowledge of who was being imprisoned under his seal, and anyone with enough money to buy a *lettre* could imprison anyone he wanted for any reason.

Book II, Chapter 15:

- In addition to being a leader of the Revolution in her own right, Madame Defarge is one of the famous *citoyennes tricoteuses* (knitting citizens) of revolutionary Paris, who would, during the Reign of Terror, take their knitting with them to watch the executions at the guillotine.

Book II, Chapter 21:

- The former fortress and prison known as the Bastille was stormed by the peasants of Paris on July 14, 1789. The storming of the Bastille marked the beginning of the French Revolution. This day is still celebrated as Bastille Day.
- The practice of hanging offenders from street lamps in Paris came to represent the revenge of the citizens of the Republic against the abuses of the fallen monarchy and aristocracy.
- When the Bastille was taken on July 14, 1789, there were only seven prisoners in it.

Book II, Chapter 22:

- The red cap worn by Defarge and his associates is called a “Phrygian cap” and was worn by French patriots during the Revolution. The Phrygians were an ancient Asian people, living in what is now Turkey; their cone-shaped caps became “caps of liberty” when the style was adopted by freed Roman slaves to symbolize their freedom. These red caps were worn especially by the vengeful and violent Jacobin party which was responsible for the Reign of Terror.

- Joseph-François Foulon was a government minister under Louis XVI. On July 22, 1789, it was discovered that Foulon, who had pretended to be dead and staged his own funeral to escape the growing wrath of the French peasantry, was betrayed by a household servant and seized by the mob, “tried,” and killed—with grass in his mouth, as it was believed that he had once said the hungry peasants should eat grass since it was good enough for his cattle.

Book II, Chapter 24:

- On August 10, 1792, the royal family were besieged in the *Palais des Tuileries*, where they had been confined after trying to escape Paris in June. On August 13, 1792, they were taken to the Temple Prison. Royalty in France was abolished, and the King suspended from office.

Book III, Chapter 1:

- The “dawning Republic One and Indivisible” is the official establishment of the French Republic on September 22, 1792. It is this Republic that officially replaced the monarchy in France, which had been abolished on September 21, 1792.
- After the King’s power of veto was suspended in early August 1792, laws were passed allowing the State to confiscate the property of emigrants.
- When King Louis XVI was imprisoned in the Temple on August 13, 1792, foreign ambassadors in France did begin to leave Paris—indicating the refusals of the other European nations to formally and officially recognize the new government in France. Following the execution of Louis XVI early in the following year, England expelled the French ambassador and officially became an “Enemy of the Republic.”

Book III, Chapter 4:

- The bloodshed that Doctor Manette witnesses during the four days he is gone is the “September massacre” or “September massacres” of September 2-6, 1792. Parisian mobs stormed the Prisons of the Abbaye, La Force, Châtelet, and the Conciergerie, killing over 1,000 prisoners, most of whom had been arrested as royalist sympathizers, aristocrats, or emigrants, etc.
- Following the establishment of the First Republic, the French developed a new calendar to reflect the “dawning of the New Era.” Although it was not put into effect until 1793, this Calendar was backdated to the establishment of the Republic in 1792 and remained in use in France until January 1, 1806.

- The use of the guillotine on necklaces instead of the cross represented the secularization of France under the Republic. Before the Revolution, France had been a Catholic country, but abuses of the Church and clergy—who tended to live like aristocracy and sympathize with the monarchy—were among the grievances of the revolting peasants. The Republic officially recognized “no Religion but Liberty.”
- The “Twenty-two friends of high public mark” are the members of the moderate Girondin party, defeated by the Jacobin faction (of Danton, Robespierre, etc.) and guillotined on October 31, 1793.

Book III, Chapter 5:

- On November 10, 1793, a vast number of Catholic priests and other Catholic clergy renounced the Church and embraced the “Religion of Liberty.” This led to widespread celebration throughout France that lasted through the rest of November and into December. Citizens desecrated churches and crowded the streets, singing and dancing the Carmagnole.
- The Carmagnole was a patriotic dance popular among the French revolutionists of 1793,

Book III, Chapter 12

- The Jacobins were members of the revolutionary faction that defeated and guillotined the more moderate Girondin party. They took control of the Republic in 1793 and ushered in the Reign of Terror. Marat, Danton and Robespierre are among the most famous Jacobins.

Book III, Chapter 15

- Madame Roland, a prominent member of the Girondin party, asked for pen and paper as she approached the guillotine so that she could record the “strange thoughts that were rising” in her. Her request was initially denied, but she persisted, appealed to the Revolution’s claims to be establishing liberty, and was given her writing utensils.
- The guillotine did, as Carlyle wrote, devour its own children. Not only were the royalty, nobles, and other alleged traitors to the Republic killed, but, eventually, the Girondin faction succumbed to the Jacobins. Then, when Georges Jacques Danton suggested that the fury of the guillotine be moderated, he fell to the accusations of his own party. Eventually Maximilien Robespierre himself, the architect of the Reign of Terror, was brought down and guillotined on July 28, 1794. His death put an end to the Reign of Terror.